

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Alchemy of Bones: Chicago's Luetgert Murder Case of 1897*

REFERENCE: Loerzel R. *Alchemy of bones: Chicago's Luetgert murder case of 1897*. University of Illinois Press, Chicago, Illinois, 2003, 319 pp.

As a criminalist interested in historic cases, I had heard only whispers about the Luetgert murder case. Even in Chicago, it was mentioned only in anthologies such as those by Jay Robert Nash. Now, thanks to Robert Loerzel, an investigative reporter from Chicago, this fascinating case comes to life to show forensic scientists and investigators how much has changed (and *hasn't* changed) in the 100 years since it captured the nation's attention.

It was a case that was the "O. J. Simpson Case" of its era—a tale of mysterious disappearance of a wife and mother whose body was never found, eerie goings-on in the factory after hours, a powerful local businessman whose financial and personal affairs were in chaos, tales of "other women," a prolonged and tumultuous court trial, even a second trial prompted by a hung jury in the first. A pall of horror hung over the proceedings because the suspect, Adolph Luetgert, ran a successful sausage-making factory and suspicions fed rumors about where the body *really* ended up. Shades of Sweeney Todd! Alas, there was never any proof of Mrs. Luetgert ending up as Dauerwurst, but it was enough to cripple the sausage business in Chicago for many months.

Adolph Luetgert was a self-made man—a poor immigrant from Westphalia landing in New York in 1865 and working in the tannery business—who moved to Chicago and started several businesses. He ended up in the 1880s with a large sausage factory in the German neighborhood of Lake View on Chicago's near Northwest Side. He and his second wife, Louise, had three children, including two sons that survived childhood menaces like cholera. He was considered a very rich, powerful, even fearsome, man in his community with a fine house with live-in maid near the large factory. The recession of the mid-1890s had hit everyone hard and Luetgert made bad decisions capped by a deal with a British con man that cost him nearly everything by April 1897. On Sunday, May 1, 1897, Adolph Luetgert was in his sleeping quarters in his factory (where he reportedly often stayed overnight). One of his sons later testified that he said goodnight to his mother in the family kitchen and went to bed. He was never to see her again. The next morning the housekeeper found Louise missing—her bed not having been slept in. A few garments were missing but most of her personal belongings still remained. When notified, Luetgert did not alert the police but

told people that his wife had gone to visit friends or family. He later testified he did not want the attention or shame of a "runaway wife" drawn to him at his time of fiscal crisis. After a week or more, Louise's family suspected foul play and notified the police. Police divisions in Chicago were fiefdoms run by politically powerful commanders. The investigators involved here were famous (or infamous) for their involvement of the Haymarket Bombing case of 1886. A police search of the factory revealed a mysterious wooden vat in the basement with a dark, corrosive, slimy, odiferous sludge. It was drained and fragments of tissue, bone, metal corset stays and two gold rings were recovered from its depths. Luetgert said it was the result of an unsuccessful attempt to make soap from tallow and fat scraps from the factory. When extensive searches failed to reveal any sign of a living Louise, Luetgert was arrested and tried for murder.

The trial was noteworthy—it was the first time anyone in Illinois had been tried for murder with no identifiable remains of the victim. (The notorious serial murderer H. H. Holmes had never been prosecuted for the many murders he committed in Chicago in 1892–93 in part because his victims' bodies had never been found—probably cremated.) Expert witnesses such as physical anthropologists and anatomists would present expert conclusions that the fragments found in the vat were remains of a human—probably a woman of small stature. Their testimony would be countered by experts for the defense (some with dubious qualifications). Blood on a knife was identified as mammalian in origin (not much of a surprise in a meat factory) but could not be further identified or linked to Mrs. Luetgert.

The trial became the focus of newspapers all over the U.S. and scores of reporters were admitted to the courtroom each day. Cut-throat competition between the many Chicago dailies led to outrageous "interpretive" reporting of proceedings. One reporter was lowered several floors through the ventilation system to listen in to the jury deliberations. Crowds of spectators filled the courthouse every day, many of whom were well dressed women attracted by the spectacle, rumors of "other women," spousal abuse, and the drama of a disappearance of a wife and mother.

The case was well presented, as reported here in some detail by author Loerzel. Modern forensic scientists would be appalled at the casual way exhibits were handled and passed through the jury, to counsel and the accused to be pawed over and stirred with pencils.

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There appeared to be no “chain of custody” as we would know it. With no forensic services, analysts were recruited from various sources. A chemistry teacher from a local high school identified the sludge as containing caustic potash, chloric acid, sulfuric acid, hematin and other compounds and bone fragments. Experts were recruited from the Field Museum of Natural History, dental practices and medical school faculties. The effect of some of their testimony was compromised by the lack of the chain of evidence and documentation of the exhibits and where they were found. Opposing experts caused such debate among jurors that they tended to cancel one another out, leaving jurors to decide for themselves the identity of the critical pieces. Luetgert denied those were his wife’s wedding rings; other family members and friends testified they were indeed hers.

Not only were jurors sequestered in a local hotel for the many weeks of each trial (sleeping two or three to a room), court met *six* days per week. One extraordinary revelation of this book was that once given the case, the jury was confined to the jury room until a verdict was reached. It was an all-male jury, of course, and they had access to a washroom and toilet, they were given blankets (and

presumably food and water), but they were locked in. After 3 1/2 days of this mental torture, the first jury reported it was hopelessly deadlocked and was dismissed, only to be hounded by pursuing media. A new judge, new defense counsel and a new jury were selected and the whole trial was repeated, this time without some of the drama and mayhem.

This case, capably recreated here in a non-judgmental form, will be of interest to many segments of the forensic community. From the primitive serology, chemistry and forensic anthropology that played critical roles to the rough-and-ready scene processing, pre-trial publicity, interrogation methods, an out-of-control press, and public misbehavior in court, we see parallels in many of the notorious cases of today. There is an interesting epilogue in the book, where the fates of many of the major characters are recorded but also the reflections and comments of modern forensic scientists on the reliability of the “bone experts.” Sadly, the exhibits themselves have been lost for many decades so we’ll never be able to really know what was in the mysterious vat in the basement of Luetgert Sausage Co.